



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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NATION'S WETLAND ACQUISITION PROGRAM MUST CONTINUE, WATT SAYS

Secretary of the Interior James Watt, acting in his role as Chairman of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission, has announced that he will ask the Commission to focus attention at its next meeting on continued funding for preserving wetland habitat for ducks, geese, and other migratory birds.

"Without continued funding, the Nation's wetland acquisition program will virtually come to a halt," Watt said. "Ensuring that funds remain available for this purpose is a very high priority for this Commission. The wetlands program makes good sense to me because it is funded by sportsmen and other conservationists who use and enjoy the waterfowl resource."

The primary sources of funding for wetlands acquisition are receipts from the sale of Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps (popularly known as "duck stamps") and the Wetlands Loan Act. Duck stamps must be purchased by all waterfowl hunters age 16 or older and presently provide about \$15 million in revenue annually. The 1961 Wetlands Loan Act authorized a \$105 million, interest-free loan to the Migratory Bird Conservation Account to be used by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in combination with duck stamp revenues, to acquire wetlands. The loan, which has been extended twice and increased to \$200 million, is scheduled to expire on September 30, 1983. Approximately \$144 million has already been appropriated under the current authorization. If the authorization expires, the remaining \$56 million will not be available. "This will leave insufficient funds to continue a national wetlands acquisition program," Watt said, "because, according to the law, the loan must begin to be repaid using 75 percent of yearly duck stamp revenues."

Prairie potholes, marshes, and other wetlands are vital to waterfowl because they provide breeding, feeding, resting, and wintering habitat. The Fish and Wildlife Service acquires wetlands through purchase in fee title and through easements that protect wetlands from being drained, filled, or burned, while the owner retains the right to continue normal agricultural use. The program is conducted on a willing seller basis.

In spite of efforts to protect them, however, wetlands continue to be lost at a rapid rate because of conversion to agriculture, housing, and other developments. The preservation of wetlands has also been slowed in recent years by rapidly escalating land prices.

(more)

The Migratory Bird Conservation Commission was established in 1929 to study areas proposed as migratory bird refuges by the Fish and Wildlife Service and to decide which areas should be acquired and added to the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Commission is chaired by the Secretary of the Interior and includes the Secretaries of Agriculture and Transportation, two members each from the Senate and House of Representatives, and the chief conservation officer of each State where a land purchase is proposed.

At the October 7 meeting, the Commission approved the acquisition of a new national wildlife refuge, Big Boggy, when funds become available. Big Boggy, located about 20 miles south of Bay City, Texas, would preserve about 4,500 acres of coastal marsh and prairie as wintering habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds.

The Commission's next meeting is tentatively scheduled for February 1982.

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